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SUBJECT: Embassy on Road in Nigeria: Sokoto

1. (SBU) Summary: On October 12-14, Ambassador and members of Embassy Public Affairs, Political, Economic and Defense Cooperation Sections decamped to the far northwestern state of Sokoto, doing two Iftar dinners, outreach events, and taking a closer look at education facilities in a region that suffers from the lowest female literacy rate in Nigeria. A relatively progressive governor is directing state funds to education, but reportedly controls access to the best facilities personally. Meetings with alumni from both university and high school-level U.S. exchange programs confirmed the significant positive impact that programs have for participants and their communities. Local audiences, including journalists, tended to focus questions on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, sharia law, and an occasional foray into Nigerian Presidential politics. End Summary.

Sokoto

2. (U) On October 12-14, the Ambassador accompanied by Public Affairs, Economic and Political Counselors, and a number of staff members from each section visited the far northwestern state of Sokoto. Sokoto played a major role in Northern Nigerian history, especially as a center of Islamic tradition and scholarship. It remains the dwelling place of the Sultan of Sokoto, the traditional and spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims. A semi-arid region, the end of the rainy season found it looking unexpectedly lush. The governor said rains had been very good this year and the state was expecting its best harvests in recent memory.

Meetings with the Governor

3. (U) Ambassador met with Sokoto State Governor Attahiru Bafawara, now in his second term. One of the more visible governors for the opposition party, ANPP, he is also a leading spokesman for the North. He is considered one of Nigeria's better governors, a supporter of more fiscal transparency, and a champion of education. He told the Ambassador that he was not interested in seeking a third term; eight years should be enough to accomplish a program. He felt progress had been made in the state, saying the problem was not a lack of resources, but proper management of resources. He said with pride that he had created a contingency fund of 30 million Naira to deal with unexpected expenses. On the future of the ANPP, He said Bhari had not indicated whether he would be a candidate for President and he felt the current leadership had failed to develop the party and it was losing relevance. After the meeting, a member of the Office of Defense Cooperation did a brief presentation for the Governor and State Council on ODC programs.

4. (SBU) In a less-formal setting the previous evening with Poloffs, Governor Bafarawa stressed the importance of President Olusegun Obasanjo stepping down in 2007 without any attempts to continue his hold on power. Strongly emphasizing the angst northern Muslims felt towards the Obasanjo administration, the Governor indicated his belief that any attempt to change the constitution or otherwise attempt to stay in power would result in a "crisis" in the north. He vented about the lack of federal funding for infrastructure initiatives in his state and elsewhere in the north, specifically citing the poor road conditions and minimal federal funding for education and health care.

Boosting Education, For Some

5. (SBU) Much of the afternoon was spent touring education facilities being upgraded and expanded under the support of the governor. The Embassy team toured a boarding school for both girls and boys equipped with science and computer labs and generally an impressive range of facilities. The governor said 120 million Naira had been devoted to the facility, nearly ten million dollars. It was clearly an elite institution, and one state worker complained quietly to one delegation member that the governor personally decided whose children would be allowed or not allowed to

attend. A similar sense of quality over quantity was present at the visit to the newly upgraded polytechnic, which was being equipped with new computer-controlled metal working equipment. Female literacy in the region is only about 20%, and many children, especially girls do not attend schools at all. One cannot help asking whether 20 half-million dollar village schools would not be a better investment than a 10 million dollar elite boarding school. Still, it was heartening to see government funds spent on schools, rather than simply disappear.

Islamic Scholars

16. (U) Ambassador and country team members met with the Sultan and members of the Islamic Council to exchange views. After the Ambassador presented President Bush's Ramadan greeting, the scholars gently grilled the U.S. team on foreign policy and the U.S. attitude toward sharia law. Ambassador reminded the Council that Saddam Hussein had been no friend of Islam and had persecuted Muslim leaders in Iraq. Attendees said that sharia applied only to Muslims and Islam fully respected women as equals. The only women present at the discussion, however, were those on the Embassy team. The Embassy team attended Iftars to break fast on the first night with the governor, whose wife held a separate event for the women, and on the second night with the Sultan, where everyone attended a single event.

A Day at the University

17. (U) Education and Islamic scholarship continued as themes the next day, spent mainly at the University of Sokoto. Post Information Resource Officer did a presentation on U.S. resources for Islamic scholars available on the internet, and arranged to return for more in-depth training. The team met with university faculty, which included two female professors, one of whom had been a Fulbright scholar. A meeting with alumni of U.S. educational exchanges, including the YES program for high school students, reaffirmed the positive impact that these programs have on participants and their communities. Professors and graduate students had broadened their horizons, but it was the high school students who stole the show. Eight-ten students had spent a year in Iowa, impressed by pizza, computers and snow. Their most lasting impressions, however, were of a warm and friendly welcome by Americans, an interest in learning about Nigeria and a respect for religion. Sought out by neighbors and schoolmates on return, they were able to provide a firsthand positive picture about America that overturned some stereotypes. Further they have formed "peace" clubs to share some of the ideas they picked up in their time in the U.S. and to engage in conflict resolution. The governor is funding scholarships for additional students to study technical subjects in the U.S.

Meet the Press

18. (U) The Ambassador gave several radio and T.V. interviews and held a press roundtable during the trip, which received excellent local coverage. The President's Ramadan message got wide dissemination, along with U.S. participation in the Iftars and site visits. The press questions focused mainly on foreign policy, but there was also interest in what position the U.S. would take in Nigeria's upcoming presidential elections. Overall the trip considerably raised the U.S. profile in the state and provided residents with the chance to hear U.S. positions directly from Americans, putting many common themes in new perspectives. The Governor commented several times that this was the first time a U.S. or western ambassador had paid such an official visit. CAMPBELL